
Multiculturalism and secularism: interrelated political challenges

Tariq Modood*
University of Bristol

There may be various reasons to rethink political secularism but in my view the most significant today, certainly in Western Europe, is what I understand as the multiculturalist challenge. It is clear West European states are now highly exercised by the challenges posed by post-immigration ethno-religious diversity and that the new Muslim settlements of the last fifty years or so are at the centre of it. This forces new thinking, not only about questions of social integration but also about the role of religion in relation to the state and citizenship. My contribution to the climate of 're-thinking secularism' has been to argue that what is sometimes talked about as the 'post-secular' or a 'crisis of secularism' is, in Western Europe, quite crucially to do with the reality of *multiculturalism*. By which I mean not just the fact of new ethno-religious diversity but the presence of a multiculturalist approach to this diversity: the idea that equality must be extended from uniformity of treatment to include respect for difference; recognition of public/private interdependence rather than dichotomized

as in classical liberalism; the public recognition and institutional accommodation of minorities; the reversal of marginalisation and a remaking of national citizenship so that all can have a sense of belonging to it. This multiculturalist challenge, at one time seen to go with the flow of liberalism – of human rights, racial equality, decomposition of collectivities such as the nation – is properly understood as requiring not just the reform and extension of liberal democratic institutions but a re-thinking of liberalism.

These are the themes of my *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* (2019). In them, the first step of my argument is to show that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism, and the next step is to show that anti-racism, whether in terms of difference-blind neutral liberal state or in terms of active de-Othering, is not enough. We need a conception of equal citizenship that brings together the equality of same treatment with the equality of respect for difference, in short, a multiculturalism. Combining a sociology of cultural racism, an analysis of a number of West European political controversies involving Muslims and a political theory of multiculturalism I show that equal citizenship requires a difference-sensitive accommodation of Muslim and other religious identities and that this means revisiting and re-

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thinking the concept of political secularism. I distinguish between the US religious-freedom based separation of church and state, a French style marginalisation of organised religion in the public space and, thirdly, what I argue is the dominant mode of political secularism in western Europe. I call this 'moderate secularism', showing it does not consist of a separation of religion and the state. It in fact includes state recognition of and state support for religion (eg., all the states of the EU, including France, fund specific faith schools or instruct specific Christian faiths in

state schools: Stepan 2011: 217) but insists that religious authority must not control political authority. In giving primacy to liberal democratic constitutionalism it marries a conception of religious freedom with an understanding that religion can be a public good – or harm – and that the state may need to assist it in achieving that good (see chapter 8). I argue that Muslims can be and should be accommodated within moderate secularism; and to do so is to achieve an egalitarian integration, a multiculturalised secularism.

Multicultural Accommodation and Religion

How in Western Europe groups and controversies defined in terms of race or foreignness came to be redefined in terms of religion and how the accommodation of Muslims came to be the dominant issue in relation to multiculturalism has now been well established (Modood, 2005 and 2007/2013). This is partly because group identities are not just a 'multi' but groups can shift from say a race to a religion focus, or fuse foci, for example by combining ethnicity and religion. Moreover, religion itself is of course a multi-dimensional activity. For example, there is scripture, doctrine, worship, organisation, codes of living, community, art, architecture and so on. The multiculturalist interest is centred on an ethnoreligious identity group that needs to be protected against racism and whose practices and symbols need to be accommodated in a respectful way in the public culture and institutions of a country in which currently they are marginalised or not recognised as part of that country. A good example of such an ethnoreligious group which has been subject to racialisation are the Jews. Jews could be understood to be followers of a religion, Judaism, but 'follow' here clearly cannot mean to believe in and strictly adhere to its rules. Many proud, self-defined Jews who are recognised as Jews by fellow Jews,

as well as non-Jews, are atheists and/or do not participate in approved collective worship and/or do not follow the rules of living such as keep a kosher kitchen or cover their heads appropriately. Indeed, it is perhaps better to think of Jews as a people with a religion, such that peoplehood and religion mutually inform each other, with religion a characteristic or a possession of a people, not of individuals per se. So, while Jews would not be the people that they are without Judaism, not every individual Jew has to be religious in order to be a Jew. Moreover, there can be sources of Jewish identity other than those that are strictly religious, such as the Holocaust as a memory of a people or a collective commitment to the state of Israel.

As with Jews, so similarly with Muslims (and Hindus and Sikhs and so on). Various Islamic schools and sects have their own view on what is expected of a Muslim and while they have some influence on how Muslims will decide who is and is not a fellow Muslim, as in the Jewish case, that is not decisive. Muslims also relate to each other as family members, as a community, as a political unity against Islamophobia or for justice for Palestinians, where non-religious Muslims, as long as they are not conspicuously

anti-Islam, are taken to be Muslims. Muslims, in my book, are primarily understood in this way, namely as a people or ethnic groups with a religion, Islam, without any assumption that all individuals are religious or that the unity of the group is exclusively religious. In recognising they are a group or a people we do not need to assume an exaggerated unity, just as in talking of black people in Britain or as an Atlantic diaspora we do not. Indeed, in thinking with my chosen category, 'ethnoreligious', we make explicit that we are talking about people not simply doctrines or organised religion, these just being a feature of the people, as in my example of the Jews, not exhaustive of the category.

Racialised groups should be protected against incitement to hatred (chapter 3). The latter involves not just the danger of immediate violence, but the production as well of a climate of opinion or emotions, or the exploitation of that climate; not just the arousal of certain hatreds in the dominant group but also a fear and humiliation in the victim group that can lead in turn to conflict and violence. Whilst the purpose of such laws is to protect people not religious beliefs, the people in question may be people marked by religious identity: Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Muslims in Britain. It is surely

evident that some Muslims are connected to aspects of their faith with such deep emotion that disrespectful attacks upon it will cause them the kind of distress that is caused to other groups by reference to (say) images of black people as beasts or by holocaust-denial? Add to this a set of domestic and geopolitical circumstances in which these Muslims – and here we might include as well Muslims who are less intense in their religion – feel that they are being targeted and harassed as culturally backward, as disloyal and as terrorists, in short as not belonging here, as unwanted and under threat. Does this not explain the explosions of protest, anger and violence sparked by *The Satanic Verses*, for example, or to the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* (Modood et al 2006, Levey and Modood, 2009)? Such cases may or may not be caught by a suitably framed law, but thinking about such vivid examples is necessary to understand what should be prohibited and what should be censored. Indeed, censure is important for those who, like myself, want to limit the use of law here. To rule out legal restrictions *and* censure is to leave minorities friendless and risk developing violent responses today and deep-seated divisions for the long term (chapter 3).

Religion and Secularist Accommodation

The emergence of the non-racial forms of minority identity assertiveness that I mentioned in the last section was not anticipated or welcomed by British (or European) politicians or sociology. Similarly, just as the sociology of race for some time had a poor and distorted understanding of the identities of Muslims and the kinds of exclusion they experience in the West – a 'misrecognition' of an ethnoreligious group in terms of race and class – political theory, including political theory of multiculturalism, has been slow to rise

to the occasion (Parekh 1990 and 2000/2006, Modood, 2007/2013). If we have to think normatively of the place of religion in a polity and ultimately a multicultural citizenship, then existing political theory is not a good place to start because it has too limited a traction with actual liberal democratic secular polities in which the challenge of a multicultural citizenship is being exercised. Standardly, theories of political secularism assume that it consists of separation of state and religion and/or state neutrality in rela-

tion to religion. Yet, even a cursory glance at what we might take to be secular states shows this to be false. Nearly a third of all western democracies have an official religion and more than half of all 47 democracies in the Polity data-set officially or unofficially give preference to one religion. Indeed most of the others give preference to more than one religion (Perez and Fox, 2018). So, let us seek greater empirical traction than political theorists usually do by beginning with a minimalist understanding of secularism, namely the view that there are two significant modes of authority, political and religious, and each must be allowed to enjoy a certain autonomy within their own spheres of concern. Each actual political instantiation or normative concept will be more than this but by beginning with this minimalist concept, we will not take a particular interpretation or set of institutions to exhaust the possibilities that exist. Rather, it enables us to work with the full range of empirical cases without normatively excluding them or misdescribing them empirically (chapter 6).

For secularists religion *is* special; their concern to delimit the sphere of religion is not extended to economics, science, the arts and so on but is singularly targeted on religion. Moreover, moderate secularism is characterised by an additional specialness as regards religion. It recognises that religion has a public good (and not just a harm) dimension and this may be supported by the state if it is judged by the state that it assists in bringing out the good. It does not promote the idea of political authority/autonomy in an anti-religious way, rather it allows organised religion and religious motives to play their part in contributing to the public good (chapter 8). This may be taken to be a form of privileging religion and of course it is. What must be borne in mind

is that few if any states uniquely privilege religion. Whether our criteria is the expenditure of tax revenues, management by the government or symbolic status as ‘national’ or teaching in state schools, most states privilege various sectors of the economy, science and universities, museums, areas of natural beauty, the arts and sport and so on – all matters strictly outside the sphere of political authority (chapter 10). So apart from extreme libertarians and anarchists, most of us rightly have no problem with the idea of state privileging various social activities and judge each case on its merits – what I call ‘multiplex privileging’ (chapter 10). It may be that we think that religion is unworthy of privileging in some or all of the above ways. Yet that is not the existing political contexts in which multiculturalists are seeking egalitarian inclusion. Moreover, the liberal goal of state neutrality about culture or religion is impossible (Modood 2007/13; *Essays* chapters 6 and 10). Indeed, there is a sense in which the separation of religion and state is not a neutral view about religion; it is a very definite view that favours some religions and attitudes to religion while disfavours religions that want a partnership with the state. Or, to put it another way, if non-separation of religion and the state is reflective of an ethical-cultural perspective – what following Rawls, is referred to as ‘a conception of the good’ – then so is its negation, the separation of religion and politics. There may be good arguments for separation but they describe few contemporary states and to pursue separation is not an ethically neutral position. Most liberal democratic states may not choose multiculturalism or to accommodate ethno-religious groups but they are not prevented by doing so by their existing form of political secularism. That is my key conclusion here.

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